“Obsession” has negative connotations, the sort associated with over-indulgence and unhealthy immersion. It leads to instant judgment rather than observation: to be obsessed with something is to exceed the “accepted” threshold of interaction with it, to be consumed by it. Jonathan Lethem is obsessed with American culture. But to understand this concept, we have to forget the negative association. Yes, Lethem may at times exemplify this connotation of excess, but he ultimately gains our sympathy with essays that are simultaneously devastating and inspiring. In *The Disappointment Artist*, Lethem writes about his cultural obsession with books, movies, music, authors, actors, directors, and musicians—spanning the last six decades—nearly all American. His obsessions warrant feelings of admiration and pity, but in such a way that the two coexist. Lethem’s essays are memoirs, reflections, and confessions, as humorous as they are heartbreaking—raw examinations of his younger years growing up in 1960s America. At their very heart lies a redemptive promise akin to American dreaming.

In the essay “Defending *The Searchers*” Lethem talks of his irrational, inexplicable need to understand the film as more than just a racist fifties Western, but he reveals as much about himself as about the film. His attempt at understanding pushes him further than simply knowing the genre of Western movies; he explains how he “surrounded *The Searchers*, ambushed it at every pass, told it to reach for the sky.” But the language he uses implies a much deeper, more personal connection with the film—he tried to “decant *The Searchers*, unmake it, consume it” (12). His choice of words, especially “consume,” indicates a breakdown of barriers between himself and the movie. Likewise, in the essay “13, 1977, 21,” he confesses that during the summer of 1977, he saw *Star Wars* twenty-one times. In the ensuing discussion, Lethem declares that he “was always already a *Star Wars* fanatic” (35). Since there was no start to his infatuation with the film, his connection with it must be inherent to *him*. Perhaps the most revealing of these obsessions is in “Two or Three Things I Dunno about Cassavetes,” an essay in which Lethem critical-
ly analyzes the films of John Cassavetes. He starts with a scene between a man and a woman (whom he later implies are himself and an ex-girlfriend) who have just watched a Cassavetes movie. The man, frustrated at the woman’s lack of enthusiasm for what they have just watched, says to her, “That movie was all about my life and everything I feel. . . . [Q]uit saying you love me because if you don’t love that movie you don’t love me because I am that movie, that movie is me” (108). The relationship between Lethem and the movie is reciprocal, with no clear line or distinction between the two. Lethem is so intertwined with the movie that he somehow becomes lost, assimilated into the work of art.

This messy conflation indicates the sense of displacement that litters his life. It is overwhelmingly present just by the format he chooses to write in: all of his essays are divided into sections, defined by numbers, geographical locations, cultural references, or separated by visual barriers, usually lines. “13, 1977, 21” is split into twenty-one sections, each exploring a different aspect of the event, preventing a continuous flow of writing, forwarding that sense of displacement to the reader. In “Lives of the Bohemians,” an essay centered on his father and his own eccentric childhood, he describes the neighborhood he grew up in as a “laboratory, a zone of mixing, never defined by one ethnicity or class” (92). His feeling of displacement is made evident when he says, “We were white families in a minority neighborhood, no way out of that” (92). Lethem grew up with parents who were in an open marriage, in a house that “became a commune, of sorts . . . a stopping-off point for former colleagues and students . . . a site of meetings, transformations, flirtations, arguments” (91). And although he assures us that he was “consciously thrilled by the adult lives around me,” he also asserts that he “wanted the human volume turned down” (90). So as a child, he deals with this excessive socialization by immersing himself in all these works of art and isolating himself from people.

In “13, 1977, 21,” he says that he was “using the movie as a place to hide, sure” (36). Star Wars was his refuge from the human noise in his life, and, Lethem admits, “I was teaching myself to package my own cravings for solitude, and my own obsessive tendencies, as something to be admired” (36). But his obsession with Star Wars is rooted in something more painful: the loss of his mother to cancer. “The summer of Star Wars,” when he was thirteen, “she was five or six months from the second, unsuccessful surgery, and a year from dying” (37).

The death of Lethem’s mother at such a pivotal stage in his life—the awkward mid-teenage years—leaves him incapable of being a child and equally incapable of being an adult. He simultaneously rejects and clings to both
in a harrowing fashion, writing with an honesty that is almost uncomfortable to read. In the final essay of the book, “The Beards,” he writes in sections headed by cultural references about the significance beards hold for him. He claims he forgot childhood and that as a result, he “became weirdly blind to the existence of my younger siblings, whose sadness would have mirrored mine back to me” (138). And yet, a mere three paragraphs later, he reveals his fear, admitting that “my obsessiveness about books, songs, and films was a beard on growing up, which I didn’t want to catch myself doing” (145). He identifies the “beard” as a way to disguise age, to hide it, yet the word “beard” also suggests adulthood itself, referring to the three men Lethem befriended after the death of his mother whom he collectively calls “the beards.” It is a powerful metaphor for the predicament Lethem finds himself in; the fact that these three men had beards, he says, “made it unmistakable (to my eyes) that my friendships were with adults and so that I must therefore be an adult myself, just as it was their beards and my lack of one that must have made it unmistakable (to other eyes) that a kid was hanging out with a grown-up” (135). The irony is prevalent everywhere. Lethem’s physical inability, as a child, to grow a beard mirrors and cruelly mocks his inability to be an adult. Perhaps as a coping mechanism for this paralysis, he engrosses himself in works of art. He explains that it was “an act of sensory deprivation, or self-abnegation. . . . Between double features of French films, between putting one book down and picking up the next, I’d glance at my wristwatch to see if I was in my twenties yet” (146). The tragedy of this self-abnegation is that, by distancing himself from himself, he numbs his sense of reality and lives his life through these cultural obsessions.

These obsessions, however, are much less about the books, songs and films he consumes, and so much more about their proponents: the authors, musicians, actors, and directors crafting their works of art. There is a marked shift from his rejection of “human noise” to his immersion in the lives of other people, which coincides with his mother’s death. In “Defending The Searchers,” Lethem explains how he “studied Ford, learned his language . . . read biographies of Wayne . . . mowed through scholarship, hoping to assemble a framework that would free me to understand all I felt” (12). The relationships he creates are primarily with the people as opposed to the form, and not only do they affect his interpretation of their work, they also affect him. In “The Beards,” Lethem blurs the artwork-artist line when he asserts that the song “The Heavenly Music Corporation” was a “friend” and that “Fripp’s long guitar solo was a human voice” (127). He not only personifies the song, but also bestows the “human voice” with the ability to be “a morality only I
understood . . . a surrogate brainwave with which to respond to the world” (127). Lethem allows these artists to plant seeds in his mind and he allows them to grow and flourish. The most powerful of these influences is his love for author Philip K. Dick. In the essay “You Don’t Know Dick,” he assumes an authoritative role in discussing the author’s life; perhaps he feels he is entitled to, considering he claims that Philip K. Dick was “responsible for beautifully fucking up my life, for bending it irreversibly along a course I still travel” (77). He probably refers to the influence Dick had on his religious beliefs. Lethem explains how at the start of the ’80s, “Philip K. Dick was also publicly converting to what seemed to me some creepy version of Christianity” (“Beards” 143). Although Lethem despises this conversion, he is incapable of untangling the work he so reveres from its author’s religious beliefs, and as a result, admits that his “own solipsism was slightly eroded” (“Beards” 143). Coming to understand a work of art forces him to understand the mind that created it.

Lethem is repulsed by his own assimilation into the beliefs and works of others, and yet he craves it—he depends on it. He continues to consume the works of other people, but he is aware of the impact this habit has on him. He says, “I downloaded art into myself, but I was also downloading myself out of my family, my body, and my life, onto a bookshelf of Complete Works, or into the ether of music or film” (“Beards” 141). This relationship is heavily burdened with references to death; the cliché “as if his life depends on it” is somewhat ironically applicable here. He concludes the essay “You Don’t Know Dick” with a list of his favorite books by the author, a list he admits is not finished. “Perhaps I fear that if I ever finish this list,” he muses, “I will die” (83). This brutal honesty lends itself to Lethem’s dependence on other people; the mere thought of concluding an obsession is, for him, too much to contend with. Lethem writes with death as his accomplice; the speed with which he jumps from a reasonably mild observation to dying is as provocative as it is fascinating. While comparing watching The Searchers and listening to “The Heavenly Music Corporation,” Lethem says, “In either case, and in dozens of others, I wanted to submit and submerge, even to die a little” (“Beards” 141). Even to die a little. The force and the extent of his engagement almost shatter him, and submersion comes almost to mean his death.

But Lethem doesn’t want to die of devotion to just any artist. No, the artists he falls on after the death of his mother need to be of the emotionally volatile sort, the ones who bare their souls through their work. He begins to reject any artist whose work is too perfected, for he finds that they cannot accommodate him and his emotional needs. In “The Beards,” he lists, almost
endlessly, the vast number of books, songs, and films he indulged in when he was younger: “I played the third album by Talking Heads, called *Fear of Music,* to the point of destroying the vinyl, then replaced it with a new copy. . . . I bought approximately two hundred Bob Dylan bootlegs. . . . I tried to see every Howard Hawks movie, every Orson Wells movie” (139). These obsessions mostly happen before his mother dies, though. Later, he ridicules these artists for being too perfect, for possessing “chilly, intellectual grandeur” (142). By plumbing these works, by dissecting them and tearing them apart, he finds the hearts of them to be unbearably empty; each fails him, fails to possess the emotional depth he so desperately needs. And so to counter this painful realization, Lethem finds solace in the works of artists who wear their imperfections as external declarations of vulnerability, in particular Bob Dylan and Philip K. Dick. He says of the two, “Dylan and Dick created bodies of work so contradictory and erratic that they never seemed to have promised me perfection, so they could never disappoint me” (“Beards” 144). By refusing to engage with anyone who might let him down, Lethem attempts to create a wall of protection around himself, a box from which he can protect himself more confidently. “The empires of data storage,” he decides, “make up a castle or armor or hermit-crab’s shell for my tender self” (“Beards” 147). It is yet another paradoxical thought that insulates him from reality; he admits this himself in “13, 1977, 21,” when he proclaims, “You can’t join me inside this box where I hide . . . but you can sure praise the box. You’re permitted to marvel at me for going inside” (36).

But the walls of Jonathan Lethem’s box are vulnerable. They are continuously being weakened by the sheer multitude of cultural references piling up against them. And once those defenses collapse from the pressure, they fall against him—the books, films, songs, authors, directors, musicians. *They are touching him.* No, more than that. They are tattoos, inking themselves into his skin, each one marking him irreversibly. They are consuming him; he is consuming them until there is no *he* and *they,* no clear distinction between his world and theirs. Yet this amalgamation of works of art that convene to form Lethem’s understanding of reality, however absurd, somehow works. He is able to write in a way that is simultaneously self-mocking and heartbreakingly raw; his style screams for attention, his words bleed through the pages and transcend what is merely ink and paper. At the beginning of “13, 1977, 21” Lethem introduces the fact that he watched *Star Wars* twenty-one times as “a sort of raw, howling confession, one I’ve long hidden in shame” (33). And much of his writing seems to be exactly this: a confession of his earlier infatuations. The shame he once possessed, the denial he once indulged, is dilut-
ed—diminished, even—as a result of writing these essays. His writing seems much less an apology for his obsessions and much more a termination of his denial. To reflect on something after it happens is to reflect with a certain perspective that is impossible to achieve when you are still experiencing it. Lethem seems to be admitting—to himself more than anyone else—that these obsessions were real. If his cultural obsessions were a “beard on growing up,” a means of refusing to grow up by just seeming grown-up, then his writing could be a removal of that beard (146). Or maybe the beard is still there, prominent as ever, and he is acknowledging its presence. To remove it would seem to undermine everything he ever obsessed over, to render those obsessions in some way insignificant. Bearded now, he is simply growing up, accepting rather than rejecting the walls of his obsession—and in so doing accepting himself, the man behind them.

WORKS CITED

“You Don’t Know Dick.” 77-84.